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ABSTRACT

The role of television in creating sex role attitudes in preschool children was examined. Boys and girls from two suburban nursery schools watched brief shows depicting male, female, and male and female puppets playing. In subsequent play the children's behavior was observed to see which sex was emulated most frequently. Both boys and girls tended to imitate the female model significantly more than the male model. These findings throw some doubt on the general assumption on the part of television producers that male models are strong identification figures and attract a wider audience than females. (JD)

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The Influence of Character Sex on Young Children's Learning from Television

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Footnote

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The Influence of Character Sex on Young Children's Learning from Television

Television is a powerful influence shaping attitudes and behavior in children. Programs have been shown to increase self control (Stein & Bryan, 1974), cooperation and sharing (Friedrich & Stein, 1975) and to lead children to react more favorably to children of other races and ethnic groups (Gold, Goldberg, & Kanungo, 1976). At the same time, social learning theorists believe that children learn appropriate sex roles through observing suitable same-sex models (Lynn, 1969; Mischel, 1970). As a consequence, researchers have begun to study the sex role concepts and behavior children learn from television.

Initial studies looked at the television programs themselves using content-analysis techniques. The accumulated evidence indicates that women are under-represented on television and are depicted in

stereotyped ways (Now, undated; Tedesco, 1974). Furthermore, there is little evidence of change (Marecek et al, 1978; O'Donnell & O'Donnell, 1978). If anything, the situation is even more extreme on children's programs. The large majority of characters are male (Dohrmann, 1975; Rejskind, 1975; Sternglanz & Serbin, 1974); the stars are almost exclusively male (Dohrmann, 1975) and the sex roles depicted are conservative and stereotyped (Dohrmann, 1975; Rejskind, 1975).

A second approach has been to study the extent to which children's sex role attitudes are influenced by the way in which men and women are depicted. Several studies found a relationship between TV viewing habits and sex role attitudes in school children. Frueh and McGee (1975) found heavy watchers had more stereotypic sex role attitudes than a comparable group of light watchers. Miller and Reeves (1976) found children who watched stereotyped programs had more conservative views than those who watched programs with a more egalitarian content. Gross and Jeffries-Fox (1978) found that television viewing was associated with sexist views in boys but not girls when age and fathers' occupation and education were controlled.

While the above studies can only indicate an association between television content and children's sex

role concepts Atkin and Miller (1975) report two experiments that indicate children's attitudes can be modified by the content of television material. In one experiment they varied the occupational role of a female endorsing eyeglasses. She was shown variously as a judge, a TV technician and a computer programmer. Subjects who were exposed to a particular occupational model were more likely to rate the occupation as suitable for women. In a second study the sex of children portrayed playing with racing cars was varied in two versions of a commercial. Overall, the sex of the children playing with the car did not influence the viewers' attitudes concerning the sex appropriateness of the toy. However, only 41% of the viewers who saw the female models recognized that they were girls; this group was more likely than the others to view the racing car as an appropriate toy for girls.

The above research leads to the conclusion that television can influence existing sex role stereotypes. The question remains, however, as to the role of television in creating sex role attitudes in the first place. In an attempt to try to answer that question, this research looked at the influence of a TV program on preschool children.

Three television programs, each four and a half minutes

long, were produced in colour and shown to seventy-nine preschoolers on a nineteen inch colour monitor. The programs were identical except for the sex of the puppet characters: one version starred two males, a second had two females and the third had a male and a female. The program showed a bright orange balance beam on a table against a neutral background; the puppets came on-screen to examine it. After they figured out what it was they played with it, first balancing varying numbers of blocks, then finding out how to balance two pieces of plasticine of unequal size. Finally they brought out their lunches, beginning with milk that they each poured into glasses placed on opposite ends of the balance. No formal measures were made of children's attention, but they did appear to watch the program intently. Puppets were used to minimize differences other than sex; they are common on children's television and Anderson and Levin (1976) have shown them to be well attended. The balance board was designed specifically for the project. A pilot test showed it to be a sexually neutral object relatively unfamiliar to the children.

After seeing the program the children were left to play with a table full of toys. Three balances, similar to the one on the program were available along with three magnets and three magnifying glasses. Also available was "junk" suitable for play with any of the above such as blocks,

corks, metal washers, scraps of wood, clothes pegs and string. Other toys were a number of deflated balloons, a large light ball, a plastic cart and pail and a bobo doll. Children were free to sit or stand or to leave the table, as a few did for short periods.

The children were from two suburban nursery schools, and ranged in age from 45 to 68 months. Initially there were 41 boys and 39 girls but one girl was dropped from the study because she left immediately after seeing the television program. Testing was done in available space in the nursery schools by both a male and a female experimenter. To make the situation as natural as possible, the children were tested in small groups of mixed sex.

Two measures were made of the influence of the program on the children's sex role concepts: their subsequent play behavior was recorded and their expressed view of the sex-appropriateness of the balance was elicited. This latter measure showed no differences between the groups. Of the 72 children who had opinions the great majority (63) said it was suitable both for boys and girls. Clearly the program did not influence their expressed views. These results are in keeping with those of Atkin and Miller (1975) who found their television commercial did not influence children's concepts of the sex appropriateness of a toy car.

Unlike that study, however, there was no evidence that the subjects misjudged the characters' sex. They were not asked directly to identify the puppets' sex, but in informal discussion of the program, 60 children referred to character sex. Of these, 93.3% correctly identified both puppets, 5% misidentified one puppet, and 1.67% (one child) misidentified both. Consequently, this cannot explain the lack of effect. Perhaps the program was too short; a longer program or a series of programs may have more effect. It could also be a result of the program content in which sex-appropriateness of the balance was indicated only by the absence of one sex. Perhaps if the dialogue had indicated the behavior to be appropriate to only one sex there would have been more learning of "appropriate" sex roles.

The influence of the programs on the amount children played with the balances was also measured. The activity-producing potential of a program has been identified as the basis of its instructional value (Palmer, 1973), and imitative play is a commonly used measure of model effectiveness (Bandura, 1977). The amount of play was determined by counting the number of times each child was recorded as playing with the balance at 30 second intervals during a 10 minute play period. Results are shown in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 About Here

A 2 x 3 (sex of subject x program) analysis of variance for unequal N's was used to analyze the results. Significant effects were associated with the program ($F = 3.19$; $df = 2/73$; $p. < .05$). Scheffe's multiple comparison analysis showed that those who had seen the female version played with the balance more than those who had seen the male version ($t = 2.59$; $p. < .05$). No other differences were statistically significant. The average amount of balance play among children who had seen the mixed version (6.0) fell between the mean of the male program (5.09) and the female program (7.5).

That the female character would be imitated more was not foreseen. From a social learning theory perspective, one would predict either greater same-sex imitation and recall (Mischel, 1970) or that the male would be imitated more (Lynn, 1969) as is generally believed in the television industry (20). Research outcomes are mixed, but generally seem to indicate no sex-of-model effect when the modelled behavior is sex-neutral, as in this study (Barkley et al, 1977). Very few studies have used actual or simulated television material and those that did contrast with the

others and are consistent with this one in finding the female model more effective. In a study of the effects of television advertising on children (Atkin & Miller, 1975) half the subjects saw a commercial for Bufferin announced by a female while the other half heard a male announcer. Those who heard the female announcer were more likely to believe the product to be superior to Aspirin. In a study of Sesame Street, Anderson and Levin (1976) found that preschoolers paid more attention to the female than to the male characters. Two studies using sex-typed activities found slightly less clear-cut results favouring the female model. Barkley (4) showed subjects a sequence with either a male or a female model playing with toys in a sex-typed fashion. Results showed the girls imitated the female model significantly more than the male while boys also tended to imitate the female more. Atkin and Miller (1975) in the study described above found children who saw girls playing with a toy racing car and recognized that they were female were slightly more desirous of playing with the car than those who had seen the male actor. The results of these studies cannot be interpreted as indicating that children prefer female characters, however. In yet another study Sprafkin and Liebert (1978) found that when they were given a choice girls selected female-focused programs and boys selected male-focused programs.

Lesser (1975) writing about Sesame Street justifies the preponderance of males as a means of meeting the needs of inner-city children for a strong male identification figure, and the television industry widely believes that male characters will attract a wider audience than will females (Sprafkin & Liebert, 1978). This study and the others cited above clearly throw doubt on these assumptions. Furthermore, while it is not clear what causes the difference between television studies and other modelling research it is clear that we must take seriously Noble's warning that results from studies using movies, live models or even television if the experimental situation is far different from a natural setting, cannot easily be generalized to the effects of models in everyday television viewing (Noble, 1975).

Table 1

Effects of program and Ss sex on balance play

	N	Mean	SD
Male program	32	5.09	4.08
Boys	17	5.71	5.08
Girls	15	4.40	2.53
Female program	32	7.50	3.35
Boys	16	7.69	3.52
Girls	16	7.31	3.28
Mixed program	15	6.00	3.74
Boys	8	5.50	3.82
Girls	7	6.57	3.87

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